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ABSTRACT

There are many indications that journalists are increasingly concerned about ethics and ethical behavior. However, the emphasis of this concern has been placed on reporter ethics. While the manner in which a reporter "ought" to function is certainly an important question, the manner in which a newspaper, broadcast station, or magazine as a whole performs may be a more important question. If institutions are defined as "individuals in patterns of interaction," then those persons in the institution, on whatever level, should be subject to the same ethical constraints as reporters. The term "performance ethics" might be used to describe the performance of the mass media in fulfilling their institutional function in the social system. If the media are to be considered organizations that have important functional consequences to the social system, more precise criteria as to how they "ought" to function should be generated. However, if performance ethics are to be applied at the institutional level, a taxonomy of desirable press functions also should be generated. Performance ethics, based on functionalism, could be the mechanism by which ethics could be applied to all individuals in the media on a broader, system-wide basis. (Author/FI)

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QUALITATIVE STUDIES DIVISION

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO PRESS ETHICS AND PERFORMANCE

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A Functional Approach to Press Ethics and Performance

Watergate, which caused almost a score of lawyers to be indicted or sentenced to jail for criminal activities, had the salutary effect of stimulating the American Bar Association to greater concern about legal ethics. Although no newsmen went to jail, Watergate undoubtedly caused the press to look at its own house to see if everything was in order. Newspapers like the Washington Post which were indirectly responsible for sending more than one public official to jail became increasingly concerned about the ethical standards of the reporters and editors who were exposing the legal and ethical lapses of others. Since Watergate, the journalistic establishment has been producing codes of ethics, books about press ethics, ombudsmen, and bureaus of fair play. Larger and more affluent papers have in-house critics who are specifically charged with reviewing, and publicly reporting on, the ethical successes and ethical lapses of the paper for which they work. From a professional viewpoint, the effect has been generally good.

However favorably one may view the new emphasis on ethics, one is struck by the fact that the codes of ethics deal almost exclusively with reporter ethics. How a reporter ought to perform is an important question. But how the newspaper, broadcast station, or magazine as a whole performs as a functioning unit in a free society is a much more important question.

Recent texts on press ethics have focused mostly on the ethics of reporting: conflicts of interest, "freebies", right of privacy, relations with sources, problems with off-the-record, and similar topics. The thrust is largely how the reporter ought to function in his role as a reporter.

Less attention is paid to how the medium as a whole ought to function in relation to the other important social institutions -- and whether, or how well, it is fulfilling those functions.

It is conceivable that a newspaper or television station could operate ethically on the reporting level -- honoring sources, eschewing free gifts, avoiding conflicts of interest, etc. -- but fail in its primary functions in the social system. Also, it is possible, if not probably, that an unprincipled group of reporters could totally ignore the accepted codes of journalistic ethics, yet produce a newspaper that functioned quite satisfactorily in the overall social system. (In fact, the latter possibility is almost a paradigm of the City of Chicago under the Daley machine: "They were a bunch of crooks but the system worked.")

Philosophers agree on few things but they generally agree that to be ethical a person must not only avoid evil but must do good. Since institutions are extensions of persons, they too must be expected to benefit mankind as well as avoiding harm to mankind. Thus the personnel of a newspaper or broadcast station could observe all the codes, but the medium as a whole could fail to function as it "ought" as a unit in the social system. If such is the case, the medium could not be described as "ethical" in functional terms. At best it could be described as "non-ethical" and if it actually harmed other units of the social system, it could be described as "dysfunctional."

Using the conceptual framework of functionalism outlined by Robert K. Merton in his *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), it is possible to determine media functions in relation to other sub-systems and the social system as a whole, and come to at least conjectural decisions as to how the media "ought" to perform.

Merton defines functions as "objective consequences to the social system." He makes the point that functions are not to be confused with motives. The

motive of a TV anchor man may be to make a good living, enjoy popularity, and earn the respect of his peers. But his functions are described by his consequences to the system. Similarly, the motive of the owner of a television station may be to make money -- but that is not his function. How he manages the station, and the effects of his management on the other sub-systems of the social system describes his function.

In Merton's conceptual framework, functions are observable consequences which make for adjustment or adaptation of the system. Dysfunctions are observed consequences which lessen adaptation or adjustment to the system. Non-functions are irrelevant to the system, with no observable results. Latent functions are neither intended or predicted.

An example: if the New York Times reports accurately that the Dow-Jones averages have dropped precipitously, the information (although negative) is functional to the economic system. Individuals and institutions in the economic sub-systems need the information to make their individual adaptations to new conditions. However, if the New York Times makes a false report that the market is about to collapse, the information is dysfunctional; those in the economic systems will make inappropriate adjustments and the systems will be out of adjustment. If a stock broker has overloaded his prize clients with stock in anticipation of a higher market, and the information he receives is that the market has broken, he may decide to solve his problems by exiting from a 28th-floor window. His action is described as being a latent function; it is not intended by the New York Times, but nonetheless was an unintended consequence of the report, and with terminal consequences for the broker.

Teleological philosophers describe ethical actions as those which result in "the best consequences for mankind as a whole." If we are willing to assume that human institutions are developed for the good of mankind, we are in a position to accept functionalism (i.e. fulfilling the proper function) as the institutional equivalent of individual ethics. Therefore, a unit of communication

that is functioning as it "ought" in relation to other sub-systems and social systems as a whole can be considered ethical; one that is not is either non-functional or dysfunctional.

In complex and highly organized systems, such as communication systems, fixing individual responsibility is difficult. Moral and ethical responsibility cannot easily be pin-pointed because actions of individuals are sheltered by the very complexity of the organization. Who, for example, is ultimately responsible for the content of any single CBS evening news program? A corporation executive who would be appalled at the thought of eliminating his neighbor's obnoxious tom cat is likely to deny or disclaim any responsibility for the poisoning of his employees, a breath at a time, in his company's foundry. In such a society, it would seem necessary and important to assess moral and ethical behavior on the institutional level, as well as on the personal level. Thus the performance of the media should be judged on the overall effects on the social system, as well as by the individual performances of those in the media.

Because codes of ethics typically deal with individual ethics, the term "performance ethics" might be used to describe the ethics of a unit of the mass media in fulfilling, or failing to fulfil, its function in the social system. If performance ethics themselves are to become functional (i.e. have consequences) criteria of performance against which the media can be judged must be developed.

Charles R. Wright, a sociologist, has made one of the few attempts to deal with mass communication in functional terms (1964:97). Wright adapted Harold G. Lasswell's three "basic communication activities": 1. surveillance of the environment; 2. correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment; 3. the transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next.³ Wright modified these functions slightly and added a fourth,

entertainment. Although Wright's criteria offer a starting point, the categories are so broad that they would be difficult to apply to media except in a very general way.

Wilbur Schramm, one of the leading theorists in mass communication, lists these functions of the media (1957:32-34): the gossip function which provides a substitute for the person-to-person relationships largely lost in modern society; the consensus function which provides a mechanism through which a society can agree upon its goals; the teaching function by which culture is transmitted to the new members of society; the entertainment function which is related to tension management; and the economic function of providing a market for goods and services.

Although Schramm's criteria may appear to be too broad to apply to the media, they might be used to generate specific research problems. For example, if television has a teaching function are children in the ghettos, who have been found to be greater consumers of television than other children, learning more of what is dysfunctional (how to commit crimes, violence, etc.) than is functional (cooperation, good health habits, getting along in the family, etc.)?

Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach have offered a schematic representation of the mass media as a social system which graphically shows the constituent sub-systems and their relationships (1975:162-181). Identifying the sub-systems and positioning them in the system is a useful and necessary starting point for a taxonomy of functions of communications. But the schematic alone tells us little on how the such sub-systems such as advertising agencies, broadcast stations, newspapers, magazines, and the regulatory agencies ought to operate in relation to one another.

Roger Fisher, a Harvard law professor, refined the often cited "watchdog function" into operational terms that approach those which will be necessary to develop usable performance criteria. In his introductory remarks to the

1972 Aspen Workshop on Communications and Society (1973: 79-81) Fisher said,

"It is for society to decide what functions we would like to have the media perform, and then we must do what we can -- by persuasion, by incentives, or by regulation -- to have those responsibilities accepted and ably performed."

Fisher then listed what he considered to be some of the specific public affairs functions of the media, and gave his personal opinion on how well the media were performing. Fisher listed these functions:

1. Communicate to citizens as a reporter, as a "watchdog," as a critic, as public forum, and an aid to citizen action.
2. Communicate from citizens, as a megaphone.
3. Communicate from government, as a megaphone, as an aid to government action, as an aid to government decision making.

In addition, Fisher listed five non-public functions of the press: to convey practical information, to help educate, to entertain, to aid commerce, and to be a source of livelihood for those engaged in communication.

Implicit in Fisher's list of functions is that the media should be communications systems as opposed to being merely information systems.

A communications system is defined as providing messages from the sender to receiver as well as from receiver to the sender. An information system is a one-way process by which the media largely reflect society -- reporting objectively on government and events to a passive audience. A communications system, using Fisher's criteria, would bring government to the people and the problems of people to the government.

Also implicit in Fisher's list of functions is the idea of press as facilitator. A function of the press, readily observed, but seldom articulated is "to make the system work." For example, the Watergate trials and hearings might never have taken place without the pressure of publicity applied to the press. The FBI and Department of Justice of the administrative branch were forced to act. The Congress was moved to hold the Watergate hearings. The judiciary with the aid of Judge John Sirica then took over and

brought about a legal resolution to the Watergate crisis. The balance of powers was restored and the system was, in Merton's term, "adjusted."

Social scientists, rather than media leaders, have been most active in attempting to define the functions of the press. However, perhaps the most ambitious effort to assess press performance ever made in this country came from the press itself. The New England Daily Newspaper Survey of 1973, directed by Publisher Loren Ghiglione and supported by the Markle Foundation, evaluated some 110 daily newspapers. A panel of press critics and editors including Ben Bagdikian, James Boylan, Herbert Brucker, and John Herbert evaluated the content of the papers, interviewed the editors, and published their findings in Evaluating the Press, The New England Daily Newspaper Survey (1973).

The functional standards were broad, but offered the judges wide discretion in making their evaluations: 1.) A newspaper should cover government at every level; 2.) A newspaper should go beyond government news and bulletin-board journalism to reveal the quality of people's lives and human fabric of the community; 3.) A newspaper should attempt to publish, as best it can, a complete and balanced presentation of local, state, national, and international news; 4.) In an age when the medium is said to be the message, a newspaper must attempt to present its news as effectively and as attractively as possible; 5.) A newspaper should stand for something. Its editorials should take a position on important local issues; 6.) a newspaper's management -- as well as its news staff -- should operate the paper with integrity: the news columns should be free of bias; employee policies that avoid conflicts of interest should be enforced; pay and working conditions should encourage the professionalism of the staff.

Understandably, the criteria for evaluation were couched in terms that are familiar to professional journalists. The judgments were made on what the critics read in the papers, supplemented by interviews with newspaper reporters, executives, and editors. Thus, if consequences to the system (society as a whole) were in the minds of the evaluators, this was an attempt to evaluate the press in largely functional terms, although the precise functions were implicit rather than clearly specified.

A functional approach to the press demands that the output of the medium as a whole be analyzed in relation to its effects on the system. The traditional approach in journalism has been to focus performance mainly on the news function; hence, ethical performance has largely been attached to the news and editing functions. A newspaper that would indignantly refuse to print an article promoting a "new pill that makes fat melt like magic" will unblushingly accept an ad promoting the same pill. A column by Ann Landers and Hints from Heloise (as vacuous as that column usually is) may have more important consequences to more readers than a report on President Carter's latest peace mission to the Middle East. Readership studies almost invariably show that columns giving personal and family advice have higher total readership than breaking news stories, an indication that from a functional viewpoint emphasis on traditional news values may have been misplaced. This is not to suggest that breaking news stories are not functional to readers; only that the other nine-tenths of the content of the paper -- advertisements, features, comics, syndicated columns, crossword puzzles -- are also functional for readers and should be considered on the basis of their consequences to readers and to the overall system.

The Uses and Gratifications theory of the press, which is an outgrowth of functionalism, makes no such distinctions as "hard news" and "soft news". An article on how to air root a dieffenbachia may be "soft" news to an editor,

but it's both useful and gratifying to a home gardener. It has more immediate consequences for that reader, and perhaps many others, than an article on an airline crash in Saudi Arabia.

If "performance ethics" of the press as a whole are to be accepted alongside of reporter ethics, a complete taxonomy of desirable press functions must be developed. The press has indicated by its acceptance of press councils, ombudsmen, bureaus of fair play, in-house critics, etc., that it is willing to have its role in society examined. Performance ethics, based on functionalism, may be on the basis on which this can be done on a broader, society-wide basis.

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